

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF REVOLUTION

(From International Viewpoint #342, July-August 2002)

By Paul Le Blanc

BOOK REVIEW: *The Algebra of Revolution: The Dialectic and the Classical Marxist Tradition*, by John Rees (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

For thoughtful activists who are in the process of committing themselves or recommitting themselves to "the long haul" of revolutionary struggle, this is among the most valuable books that have appeared in the last several years. It is valuable for anyone who wants to develop a deeper comprehension of the history and theory of Marxism.

It was the German philosopher GWF Hegel (1770-1831) who developed a way of comprehending reality, a method of analysis, hailed by the Russian revolutionary Herzen as "the algebra of revolution". Known as dialectics, this philosophical orientation profoundly affected Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, and was developed as an essential component of the revolutionary Marxist tradition. It has often been shrugged off - with a grimace or a laugh - as impossibly dense. But Rees's study demonstrates that such a dismissal can undermine the ability to understand the world among those who wish to change it.

It is truly unfortunate that - far from being widely recognized as the valuable contribution it is - this book has had little publicity in Marxist and left-wing journals. Perhaps Rees's involvement in the British Socialist Workers Party is seen as sufficient reason by some for ignoring him, but this is hardly a narrow "party" tract. It is a book of enduring value. One of the few reviews to appear so far, in the important Marxist journal *Historical Materialism*, distorts what Rees says in order to make him look foolish and dismiss his work. The reviewer (who is capable of much better) counts among the author's "sins" the fact that he finds important philosophical contributions in the work of Frederick Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, V.I. Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Georg Lukacs - and that Rees is critical of one of the reviewer's favorite thinkers, the late Raya Dunayevskaya, who engaged in interesting Hegel and Marx scholarship and headed a still-existing "Marxist-Humanist" current.

Rees makes positive reference to her work but criticizes what he sees as her attempt "to more or less apply Hegel's categories to the modern world" in a manner that results in an over abundance of "abstract generalization" (p 108). In his opinion, Hegel's version of dialectics is vitally important but also fundamentally flawed; his method had to be re-worked to be effectively utilized by Marx and others to advance revolutionary analysis and struggle. Some might respond that he is too critical of Hegel, while others might complain that he gives the German philosopher too much credit. But the primary focus of the book is less on the Hegel/Marx relation and more, as the sub-title suggests, on the place of the dialectic in "the classical Marxist tradition". Rees provides an admirably

clear, stimulating, and well-documented survey discussing Marx and Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, Lukacs, not to mention Eduard Bernstein, Karl Kautsky, George Plekhanov, Antonio Labriola, and others. This is a volume that should be in the personal library of all socialist scholars and activists.

## **Hegel and Beyond**

Rees highlights Hegel's immense intellectual labors, which were powerfully influenced by the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. They combined a deep commitment to human freedom with a profoundly historical sensibility embracing the notion that reality unfolds and moves forward through the interaction of contradictory tendencies. Each of these tendencies contain elements of "truth" that can only be understood adequately as part of a complex, multi-faceted, always-evolving totality. Hegel developed concepts and categories to help comprehend the almost impossibly complex, dynamic, contradictory reality in which all of us are enmeshed.

On the other hand, Rees is critical of Hegel's philosophical idealism that gives primacy to the intellectual constructs, with actual realities represented as manifestations of the abstract principles contained in the realm of ideas. "Starting from the necessity of conceptual thought" Rees tells us, "Hegel ended with a system in which one category automatically produces another until a whole system results which, it is claimed, 'must' be an adequate account of reality" (p 109). He explains: The basically idealist thrust of his philosophy did not simply result in his claim that ideas were the moving force in the world. Ironically, it also forced him into crude, deterministic assertions about the empirical world as well" (p 65). This contributed to a growing conservatism in the older Hegel that, for example, tended to idealize the "necessity" of the authoritarian Prussian state under which he lived.

One could add, however, that an emphasis on the opposite - the primacy of objective material realities and the secondary importance of the "subjective" element - can lead to another form of non-revolutionary determinism. This comes through in some of the formulations of the Second International's influential "pope of Marxism," Karl Kautsky, who emphasized that it was the "objective realities" of the capitalist economy, not the "subjective realities" associated with the ideas and activities of the labor movement that would bring about the socialist revolution. Such seemingly hardheaded, "scientific" fatalism and determinism has all-too-often passed for profound Marxist wisdom. This can cause working-class militants to passively wait for revolutionary inevitabilities which, as the history of the twentieth century demonstrates, never materialize.

In contrast, Marx and Engels had seen the objective and subjective factors as an interacting unity of opposites, with the working class itself (thanks to the role in the labor process and the quality of human consciousness) combining subjective and objective. "Once this notion, the unity of subject and object has vanished ... the working class is no longer seen as the identical subject-object of history", Rees argues. "That is, it is no longer seen as a class whose struggle transforms it from being an exploited class lacking

in socialist consciousness and unable to control the society that it produces into a class capable of consciously fighting to banish exploitation and able to run society according to its own needs" (p 140).

This is precisely the element that is built into the mass strike conceptions of Luxemburg, the theory of permanent revolution of Trotsky, and the understanding of the party/mass struggle dialectic of Lenin (further elaborated by the Hegelian Leninists Lukacs and Gramsci).

### **'Mysteries' of the Marxist dialectic**

Rees's book helps to demystify something about which much complicated (and also simplistic) nonsense has been propagated. While making a passing reference to "the characteristic Hegelian triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis", he is scornful of the idea that the Hegelian dialectic can be reduced to this "eternal trichotomy," and he approvingly quotes Plekhanov that "It does not at all play in Hegel's work the part which is attributed to it by people who have not the least idea of the philosophy of that thinker" (pp 39, 146, 241).

Rees is more inclined to accept (as "useful reminders of forms in which dialectical contradictions sometimes work themselves out") the three "laws" identified by Engels: unity of opposites; transformation of quantity into quality; and negation of the negation. The unity of opposites involves the dynamic linkage between interpenetrating yet contradictory elements - for example, the relationship between workers and capitalists as essential components of the capitalist system. The transformation of quantity into quality involves the process by which gradual "numerical" alterations can result in qualitative change - water turning from a liquid into a solid or gas depending on the rise or fall of the temperature, or an escalating number of workers and workplaces being involved in a strike changing a situation from an economic dispute to a politically-charged general strike to a social revolution. The negation of the negation involves the development of some aspect of reality in which its original state is overcome or transcended (negation), but rather than being simply obliterated, the elements of the original aspect of reality are preserved (negation of the negation) in the process of transformation - for example, a liberal's fundamental belief in human rights and freedom of expression being preserved in his or her rejection of liberalism for socialism, or a revolution overcoming the old society while at the same time preserving and raising to a new level elements of the old society.

Rees emphasizes, however, that these three "laws" are "not the only way that dialectical development can take place" and that by no means do they constitute some "supra-historical master key". He clearly prefers a different way of explaining the dialectical method, emphasizing "three principles: totality, change, and contradiction. Taken separately these principles do not constitute a dialectical approach. Only when they are taken together do they become dialectical." He adds that "the parts and the whole are not reducible to each other. The parts and the whole mutually condition, or mediate, each other" (pp 5, 7, 8-10).

He emphasizes that Marx's materialist conception of history is grounded in this analytical approach: "Society is taken to be in a process of constant change. Such change involves the totality of relations - economic, political, ideological, and cultural - of which the society is composed. This process of total change is a result of internal contradictions, manifested as class antagonism, which reconstitute society anew by both transforming and renewing the forces that first gave rise to the initial contradiction" (p 83).

At the same time, Rees explains, the dialectical method in Marx's hands does not consist of "a progression of self-generating categories", but instead that he continually refined and revised his dialectical analysis through "constant empirical verification", understanding that "real contradictions are ... more diverse and complex, and change more rapidly, than the concepts that express them, even when these are dialectical concepts especially designed to capture complexity and change. Constant empirical work is therefore essential to renew both the concrete analyses and the dialectical concepts that are generalized from these analyses." Lenin described this as Marx's method in *Capital*: testing by facts or by practice respectively, is to be found in each step of the analysis" (pp 110, 113).

## **Permanent Revolution**

After discussing Hegel's thought and how Marx and Engels transformed it *The Algebra of Revolution* provides an account of the "crisis of Marxism" that arose in the Second International in the early twentieth century, as the revisionism of Bernstein and the "orthodoxy" of Kautsky - each in their own way - set aside dialectics, in a manner that complements setting aside Marx's revolutionary strategic perspective.

From this chapter we gain a sense of the tragedy of the "father of Russian Marxism" George Plekhanov, whose keen appreciation of Hegel's thought is undermined by a dogmatically linear (as opposed to open and contradictory) notion of social development. The glory of Rosa Luxemburg is that her approach to social development and revolutionary struggle is permeated with the dialectical approach that made her "most capable of meeting new challenges...conducting new analyses and of distinguishing the fundamental from the merely phenomenal" (pp 164-165).

Chapters on "Lenin and philosophy" and "the legacy of Lukacs" suggest that in the traditions of revolutionary Bolshevism and the heroic Communism of the early 1920s, we can find a high point in the development of Marxist dialectics. A chapter on Trotsky continues in a similar vein, providing one of the most complete and satisfactory discussions of Trotsky's understanding and utilization of dialectical thought. In discussing Trotsky's distinctive perspective on permanent revolution, Rees comments that Trotsky's theory was a brilliant application of the dialectical method to new historical circumstances." His summary is worth reflecting over.

**"The theory of permanent revolution marked an important break with the**

**determinism of the Second International. Later it became the cornerstone of Trotsky's fight against Stalin's fatalistic theory of 'socialism in one country.' In both cases, Trotsky argued that for a backward country to be ripe for socialist revolution. It did not have to go through all the stages of capitalist development that characterized the history of the advanced capitalist powers. Trotsky's theory, the law of combined and uneven development, stressed that any analysis of the revolutionary potentiality of backward countries must start from the totality of capitalist development on a world scale. Here it was clear that the material conditions for a socialist society existed, even if they did not exist in each part of the world system taken in isolation. If a revolution was to be successful in a backward country, then it must spread to other parts of the system and so tap their material wealth. Thus seeing the interconnectedness of the different parts of the totality was also the key to Trotsky's analysis. To realize this potential, the working class would have to battle consciously for the leadership of the revolution."** (p 283). (*Emphasis by the Web Ed.*)

Rees concludes his study with the obvious but essential notion that the Marxist dialectic revolves around "an appreciation of the revolutionary potential of the working class", and that any effort to renew Marxist philosophy is actually inseparable from the task of overcoming late-twentieth-century defeats of the working class through rebuilding the working-class movement. He adds that "a revolutionary organization remains the indispensable tool for overcoming the unevenness in working-class consciousness, maximizing the effectiveness of working-class struggle, recalling the lessons of past victories and defeats, and educating and leading workers in struggle" (p 301).

We are faced with the urgent question, however, of how these truths can be understood and applied in the unique historical circumstances at the dawn of our new century. Any mechanistic effort to superimpose "orthodox" formulas from earlier historical contexts onto the new and fluid realities would be a violation of the dialectical method Rees so ably discusses in this fine book. A simplistic effort to proclaim a revolutionary working class party, even if done in the name of revolutionary dialectics, is guaranteed to be fruitless. Such things must evolve organically from the actual class struggles of the real world in which we live. The question is: how can that process be advanced by thoughtful activists? Armed with the theoretical tools surveyed in *The Algebra of Revolution*, designed for those committed to developing revolutionary analyses and strategies, activists of today and tomorrow - one can hope - will be better able to understand the world in order to change it □